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Alice Bliss

Written by Laura Harrington

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Alice Bliss

Laura Harrington

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Prologue: August 20th

This is the first time Alice has been allowed to walk back to their campsite from the Kelp Shed alone. She is fourteen, barefoot, her sneakers tied together by the laces and slung across her shoulder so she can feel the soft, sandy dust of the single-track road between her toes. Her sister fell asleep halfway through the square dance, dropping from hyperexcited to unconscious in a flash. Her father carries Ellie draped over his shoulder, and casually, or so it seems, her mother says, "Come home when the dance is done."

She can hardly believe it. The dance is still in her feet, still in her bones, the steps like an intricate game. She danced with everyone and anyone at all, old and young, men and women, just to stay on the floor and moving. The caller was a blind man with two fingers missing from his left hand. His face was wrinkled and brown from the sun, his body heavy and the voice that called the steps strangely high and sweet. A boy's voice in a man's body. A boy's wildness, as though he had no awareness of himself in his body.

She gave in, finally, and danced with her father—embarrassed to be asked by him, worried that everyone would be watching and judging and thinking her still a child. But he surprises her. He is a good dancer. Precise. His hands firm on her back or her hand or her arm. She is suddenly dancing better than she has ever danced before, suddenly experiencing the freedom inside the squares. She can let go because he is so confident. She is tasting something adult, grown-up, or almost tasting it. It is just beyond her reach, this feeling, what it is, how to name it and understand it. Now it is pure sensation, unadulterated

fun. Years later she will remember his touch on her back, pulling her in, letting her go, her own helpless laughter, the way he guided her, his touch steady and strong, and how he held her close and let her go, over and over again.

The dust beneath her feet now is cool, the day's heat long gone. It is mid-August and already you can feel fall coming with the way night rushes in. She pulls on her sweater and as she crests the first hill she can see almost all of Small Point, the shape of the island dark against the water. She can hear the waves on the beach below her. There are fires still burning at a few campsites, but mostly it is true dark. Alone on the road, she stops. What is she feeling? Intensely awake. Aware. A bit scared. She senses everything, her body open to the sky and the night, the smell of salt and pine and wood smoke, the wind, the scratchy wool of her old sweater, her hips loose in her jeans, her feet cool and tough and sure on the road.

In the distance she sees what look like stars on the water. Following the dip in the road, she loses sight of them, but cresting the next hill she sees them again. She breaks into a jog and takes the turn down to the ocean, away from her campsite. There it is again. Another curve and she can see where it is: the Devil's Bathtub. She is on the beach now, walking toward the outlying rock formation, a wide cleft in the rocks that becomes an eight foot pool at high tide and empties to sand at low tide.

There are fires on the water. How can that be? And now she sees them: a group of boys lighting small wooden rafts on fire and setting them afloat in this natural pool. They are quiet, intent. Why are they doing this? It's so beautiful, the small rafts floating, in flames, and then gone.

The boys have run out of boats; the last fire winks out. Now they strip off their clothes, daring one another to dive in. She crouches where she is, watching them, their pale bodies against the dark rock. She has never seen a naked boy before. She is not close enough to see much,

but their nakedness is loud in the dark. Her eyes pass over each boy as though she could run a hand across a face or a chest, along a thigh.

She turns and lies in the sand, listening to their shouts as they dive and splash, listening as the cold and the search for their clothes quiets them. And the sky overhead is raining stars. These are the Perseids her father has told her about. She wants to get up and go and find him, she wants to tell the boys, Look up! Look up! But she can't move; there is magic occurring in front of her eyes. The heavens are throwing jewels at her feet. It is impossible, as impossible as fire on the water, as impossible as her hand on the chest of a naked boy, and yet here she is, seeing it with her own eyes.

January 29th

Matt Bliss is somebody who knows how to be happy. A former engineer, he's now a carpenter, doing what he loves, a craftsman, meticulous. He likes to say he escaped from his career and got himself a job. He coaches Little League even though neither of his daughters shows any aptitude for baseball. He was a pitcher on the local farm team right out of college, until his father told him to get serious and he went to grad school for his engineering degree. He still pitches for a local team.

Matt grows vegetables. Alice helps. They grow the best corn and the best tomatoes in town, not like there's much competition anymore. Ever since Mr. Hendrickson down the road died, the old time guys who put in vegetables every year have really dwindled. Matt says, "You just wait, the hippie kids will bring it all back again; all that poison in our food now, people are waking up. You can do it yourself. Good food. Cheap." And they've got this black dirt he loves to go on and on about. Topsoil eighteen inches deep. "Beautiful stuff!" He keeps trying to get Angie interested in canning or preserving or freezing their bounty, but this is not Angie's bailiwick.

So Alice and Ellie and Matt are the ones to snap beans, make tomato sauce and tomato juice and salsa, grape jelly and grape juice. Matt wants to plant three more apple trees in the side yard where Angie would like to have a nice patio. Two more cherry trees, too, right next to his grape arbor. Apple butter, he tells her, apple pies, cherry pies. Angie rolls her eyes and says: "Matt Bliss, you did not marry a farm girl." He laughs and picks her up and kisses her. Times like this the two of them head off for a "nap" hand in hand. Eventually figuring out just what this euphemism means makes Alice a little queasy. Here it is, right in front of her face, the power of opposites to attract.

Angie would love to stay in a nice hotel; Matt likes to camp. Angie is upwardly mobile, a striver if ever there was one; Matt likes things just the way they are. Angie thinks they're living in a starter house; Matt thinks they're home. Angie likes French perfume; Matt likes to get his hands dirty. The fact that Angie might like those workman's hands on her perfumed skin is a thought Alice vigorously chases from her mind.

The army reserve was a bone of contention, too. Angie all hung up on what's fair, why should Matt have to do it, what about his own family. Matt talking about doing what's right, not letting somebody else do what he should do: serving his country, an example to his girls. Finally they agree to disagree and Angie seems reconciled to it, even seems to enjoy the additional income, the occasional dinner in a nice restaurant, all dolled up in a new dress and high heels. And, oh, there's that perfume again, Matt's laughter, Angie's surrender, and another closed door.

But now, with the war dragging on and on, Matt's unit has been called up. He's heading to Fort Dix. Until recently reservists got six months of specialized instruction. Now they are fast-tracking volunteers through six weeks of supposedly high-quality, hurry up, move 'em out training.

The weeks prior to his leaving are an insane rush. Angie and Matt

talk late into the night, every night, sitting at the kitchen table. They argue, Angie tries not to cry again, they pore over health insurance, Matt's will and living will, the power of attorney forms. They try to anticipate what Angie will be facing in the coming months.

They are running out of time. They all know it. It's in the air they breathe.

Alice is so tired her eyes are burning but she can't sleep. As long as her father is still awake and still in the house and still talking or drinking coffee, Alice wants to be near him. So she sits in the dark at the foot of the stairs and listens.

"Why are you insisting—?" Angie's voice pops up a register when she's upset.

"You know why."

"Tell me why the United States Army is more important than your own family."

"It's not an either or equation, Angie."

"You like this. You're actually excited."

"I like the work, I like my crew, I like the challenge, the chance to—"

"But leaving us, Matt—"

"You know I don't want to leave you."

"They'll throw you right in the middle of—"

"I'm going where I'm needed."

"I need you. Doesn't that count anymore?"

"Of course it does."

"I never imagined—never—that you would do something like this. You were going to play baseball for god's sake. *Baseball!* How did we get from baseball to—"

"Angie, it's not just about you and me."

"Okay, so you're the selfless hero and I'm the selfish wife. You think

I want this role? I didn't sign up for this. This was not part of the plan."

"I know."

"I hate this, I really hate this."

"Sweetheart . . ." Alice can hear the ache in his voice.

"I want . . ." Angie's voice breaks.

"I don't want to be one of those guys who gets old and says, I wish I had done this, I wish I had done that."

"Oh, Matt . . ."

"I want to contribute, and I don't think we should just send our kids to this war."

"But what if—?"

"Don't you have any faith in me?"

"Of course I do."

"I'm coming home, Angie."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

It's quiet for a moment.

"I want letters, you know," Matt says. "Real letters. With perfume. You can't carry an e-mail around in your pocket."

"You're not so deluded you actually think this is romantic?"

"I do. A little."

"It won't be romantic if—"

"Oh, yeah," he teases her, laughing. "The fallen hero, blah, blah, blah."

"Matt!"

Alice hears the kitchen chairs scrape across the floor and knows it is time to beat a retreat up the stairs to bed. But she waits another moment, and another. She wants to see her dad one more time tonight.

They walk through the kitchen door. The dining room light is nothing more than a warm glow, illuminating them. Matt pulls Angie to him and kisses her, and kisses her some more.

Alice backs slowly up the stairs, carefully stepping over the creakiest step, third from the top. She puts her freezing cold hands under her armpits to try to warm them as she walks down the hall to her room. She waits to duck inside her door until she hears them on the stairs. Matt has his arm around Angie's waist and he has even managed to make her laugh. That soft, musical, surrendering laugh Angie saves just for Matt and his beautiful blue eyes.

Alice closes her door as softly as possible and leans against it, hoping they have not heard her. She hears them pass by whispering and giggling like little kids.

Ellie has kicked her covers off as usual. Alice pulls the quilt over Ellie and then climbs into her own bed. She listens to Ellie breathing; she closes her eyes, tight, tight, and tries to breathe through the knot in her chest. She wishes she could call Henry but that would mean waking up Mr. and Mrs. Grover and getting into trouble for calling so late. She wishes they still had their walkie-talkies hooked up. She could ask Henry to leave his on so she could listen to the static and hear him sleeping and breathing the way she did that whole terrible month in fourth grade when her grandfather was dying. What happened to those walkie-talkies she wonders, and what's Henry doing right now? She'll ask him tomorrow. If it doesn't sound too crazy in the cold light of day.

January 31st

Matt is in his workshop puttering around with a cup of forgotten coffee sitting on the windowsill. It's a cold day with flurries and a gusting wind, so he's got the woodstove going full blast and he's wearing his tan work jacket with the ripped pocket. Alice slips in and sits on a wooden crate near the stove. What is she doing here, exactly? Her English homework lies forgotten in her lap. She is, what? Hanging out? Breathing the air? Daydreaming? Making a nuisance of herself?

All of the above? She brought her dad a toasted muffin as a way of interrupting him and then stuck. Like a burr. She is uninvited, she feels awkward; but this is where she has to be even if Matt would rather be alone.

But Matt would not rather be alone. There are things he wants to say to his daughter before he leaves but they all sound so portentous and ominous that he can't bring himself to begin. There are things she needs to know, things she needs to prepare for, and it's really not fair to leave all the talking and informing and awkwardness to Angie. So he talks about the garden instead. He pulls out last year's plan and asks Alice to come over and take a look. She throws another log in the woodstove and joins him at the workbench.

"So I was thinking less corn because there will only be three of you."

"What about Gram? She can always take the extra."

"Because that way we could squeeze in another row of yellow beans."

"Okay."

"And beets."

"You're the only one who likes beets, Dad."

"Okra?"

"Blech."

"Broccoli?"

"Two plants at most."

He notates the changes as they talk.

"You can do peas spring and fall like we did last year."

"Can we do basil?"

"Sure. And Mom likes arugula."

"Yeah."

Suddenly Alice's hands are clammy and she can't lift her eyes from the plan.

"You don't like it," he says.

"I liked it just fine last year. I thought last year was perfect."

"No changes? No building on our successes and learning from our failures?"

"We didn't have any failures."

"Just way too much yellow squash."

"Okay. Let's take out half the yellow squash."

"But keep the corn?"

"Yes."

"And everything else."

"Just like last year," Alice says, slowly and carefully.

"Because . . . ?"

"Because I want it to be the same."

Alice manages to look him in the eye, which is when he can see how hard she is working to stay in control.

"Okay." He smiles at her. "We'll go with last year's design."

"Good."

"You want gourds even if I'm not here?"

"Yes!"

In the far corner of the garden Matt grows decorative gourds. They are strange things: bumpy and lumpy and misshapen. But they are colorful and surprising and they serve no purpose other than to amaze. Alice has every intention of growing gourds this year and every year for the rest of her life.

Matt labels the plan with the date and tacks it up on the wall.

"You can rototill mid-April if the ground isn't too wet and heavy. You can call Jimmy Rose to do it; or ask Uncle Eddie to help you."

"Got it."

"You might have to pester Jimmy. He gets busy."

Matt looks out the window at the snow covering the garden.

"And I want you to help your mom."

"I know."

"No, Alice. Really help her. Like you're her partner. I want you to

help her take care of Ellie and the house and . . . She's gonna need you."

"Okay. But tell her to remember to ask me."

"What?"

"She acts like I'm supposed to know everything she wants and when I don't she gets mad. If she'd just tell me. Or ask me—"

"You tell her."

"She doesn't listen to me."

"Keep trying."

Alice looks at her feet.

"Honey? Keep trying."

"Okay."

"You know where all my papers are."

"Dad! We've been over this!"

She doesn't want to hear about his will and his life insurance again. She doesn't even want those papers to exist.

"I opened up an account for you." He reaches into his back pocket and holds out a bankbook from the local bank. "It's just a basic savings account. But I put five hundred dollars in there for you. In case you need something."

"Dad, it's okay."

"Or there's an emergency."

She's backing away from him. She doesn't want to touch the bankbook.

"Or your mom can't handle things for a few days."

"Dad!"

"Alice, there are things you need to know."

She trips backing away from him and sits down, hard, on her butt. Which is funny. In an awful sort of stupid, annoying way.

He reaches out to help her up and pulls her into a hug. It's a real hug, the kind of hug he used to give her before she started turning into a teenager and growing breasts and getting sweaty and unsure.

He holds her for a long time. She breathes him in. Sawdust. Wood smoke. Cold coffee. Aftershave. Linseed oil. *Dad.*

Matt is trying to stay right here with Alice; he is trying not to let his mind run off with all the *what ifs* that have been keeping him awake at night. He's wishing his parents were still alive. His mom would know how to pick up the slack, or how to step in if Angie and Alice really can't get along. And his dad . . . his dad would plant the garden with Alice, and take her to baseball games and . . .

"I need to show you something."

"Not your will again."

"Come over here."

He leads her to the big wooden tool chest. He pulls out the first three levels of tools, then opens a drawer and slides that out completely. Underneath the socket wrenches there's a plain white envelope with her name on it. He opens the envelope and fans five one hundred dollar bills.

"What's *that* for?"

"It's there if you need it. And in the envelope there are some important numbers. The VA so you can get benefits, my lawyer, my life insurance . . ."

"Dad! You're talking like you're not coming back."

"No, no, no." He grins at her, and his whole face lights up. "This is like carrying an umbrella in case it rains, and then it doesn't rain, so . . ."

"What?"

"It's just insurance. It's just an umbrella. You can't take it too seriously."

She wants to believe him.

"And together, right now, I want the two of us to make a list of who you can call if you need help."

She's looking at the floor and she's thinking, no list, no cash, no strategies. Can he just back out, refuse to go, change his mind? Could

they move to Canada? Or Mexico? Could they just get into the car and go? Or could she get violently sick right this minute or have some awful but minor accident that would keep him from leaving?

"C'mon. A list."

"Define help."

"Shoveling the driveway, jumpstarting the car, advice on a repair, moral support, somebody to take you to the movies or the library or out for ice cream."

So they agree on Gram and Uncle Eddie and Henry and his parents and her favorite teacher, Mrs. Cole, and Mrs. Minty, who lives down the road, in a pinch, and her parents' friends the Hoyts, from the old neighborhood, and her dad's baseball buddy Bobby Lester. She adds Mrs. Piantowski, the lady who bakes bread for Gram's restaurant, at the last minute.

Her dad writes all these names down in his perfect block printing and adds the phone numbers from memory or the phone book. And then he adds the family doctor, dentist, banker, and insurance man.

He writes up a second copy to put in the house and tacks the original to the inside lid of his toolbox. He pulls the only chair over to the woodstove next to Alice's crate and opens the door to the stove so they can watch the fire burn. He picks up the muffin and hands a piece to Alice before sitting down and stretching his feet out to the fire. They sit like that, not talking, for what seems like a long time.

Outside the back window Alice can see the outlines of the garden, some of the furrows visible under the snow, stretching away in long thin rows. She can't imagine doing the garden without her dad. It's his thing; she's always thought of herself as his assistant at best. She can't imagine doing anything without her dad and she starts to feel like she can't breathe. And then she looks at him. Just looks at him as he watches the fire with muffin crumbs on his lap.

"I'll write to you."

"I'm counting on it."

"Every day."
"Good."
She takes a breath.
"Dad . . ."
He closes up the woodstove.
"We need to go in, I think."
Not yet, Alice thinks, not yet.
"I wish . . ."
"Me, too, sweetheart. Me, too."

February 1st

Matt is getting on a bus headed to Fort Dix, New Jersey. That's not so bad. Nothing to worry about, really. It's just a bus. It's just New Jersey. And if anybody actually gets to know Matt Bliss on base it's absolutely a foregone conclusion that they will find him so useful, so essential to the running of, well, everything, that his superior officers will choose to keep him stateside. And safe. And alive. Until they send him home. On his own two feet. Much sooner than expected. This is what keeps running through Alice's mind as they go through the motions of saying good-bye.

Henry wanted to come with them, but that idea got nixed. So he and his parents stood out on their front steps to wave at them as they drove along East Oak Street. Henry was waving his baseball mitt over his head, which got a laugh out of Matt. Matt slowed the car way down and cranked his window to wave back before he blasted the horn and sped away.

Now they're standing with the other reservists and their wives and families at the Rochester Greyhound station. The men are in fatigues, the wives are in jeans or stretchy pants, the kids are wearing dirty parkas and have pink cheeks and runny noses from the cold. It's not romantic like all those classic movie scenes of parting at train stations;